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## Lent 4 Series A 2017

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## Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26

*The Gospel reading dominates the pericopes today. Taking advantage of the simpler worship of Lent, the editors of the pericope system have directed us to one of the more potent stories of the NT, Jesus healing the man born blind in John 9. It is a complex and beautifully told story which really needs all its words and resists shortening.*

*If we think of the season of Lent as Baptismal preparation this Sunday focuses the candidate past the actual rite of Baptism to the life that is lived thereafter. The dominant theme in today's readings is Light, a light that shines on our path, illuminating a whole different way to live and which especially illuminates us as children of God. Without this light we are blind – a far more common ailment than we normally admit. Vision correction has really rendered many folks in our communities sighted when even a few hundred years ago they would have been effectively blind.*



*So a little discourse on the metaphor of light is in order: this might seem really easy, but often we, who live in a world in which light is as close as the flip of a switch don't really get how marvelous light in the darkness really is. We only get a glimpse of it when we take a tour of some cave and they turn off the lights, or we are camping in the wilderness and the battery in our flashlight grows weak.*

*The ancient world was without street lights, without electricity, without batteries. The darkness had a way of pressing in on one in that context. The guttering flame of a hand held lamp like the one pictured above was often all that stood between a person and total darkness. The lamp pictured above, by the way, was excavated from a first century Palestinian house. Those lights took attention, replenishment of their oil, trimming of the wick. They could sit in the palm of your hand and a house might have 10 or 20 of them. As the homeowner would go from room to room at dusk they would often sing a song. If you are using Evening Prayer for your Lenten services, you may the song the people sang as they lit these lamps. It was called the Phos Hilarion or "Joyous Light" (do you see the word "hilarious" in that?) This little song meant that every night when the people of the house lit their lights they would sing about Jesus, the Light of the World. Almost is enough to make you regret switches, isn't it? Can you imagine how much richer our lives would be with Christ if we remembered him every time we turned on a light?*

*This little song came from a particular song the early Christians sang at the Easter Vigil. On Good Friday the members of the congregation would presumably extinguish their household flame. They would spend the night of Good Friday in darkness, eat cold meals. On Saturday they would come to Church with their little hand held oil lamps. The priest would strike a new flame and light the great paschal candle. From it, all the members of the assembly would light their oil lamps. They would process in a lit processional into the church, they would listen to a cantor*

*sing an expanded version of the Phos Hilarion. They would listen to long Scripture readings and prayers; it was a vigil. They would witness the baptisms of the candidates who had been preparing, sometimes for years. They would joyfully commune with them. Then, they would take their little lamp with its new flame and carefully carry it home. That flame would rekindle the hearth and the lamps in their house until the next Good Friday.*

*This light of Christ literally lit their whole life.*

*How will the light of Christ light the lives of our people? How will this light show them their sin and their blessing? How will they avoid the pitfalls and the toe stubbing sin? How will they know the way to walk and the way to run? How will they see the opportunities and the blessing which Christ gives them? How will they grow in that light? How will they be comforted in the dark world and protected from their enemies by the light?*

*As you can see there is much to light.*

*In the past we wondered if it is possible to make these metaphors of light or sight/blindness function for our people with the same sort impact that they once had upon people. How about even a part of that ancient impact? Is the metaphor for well lit and vision corrected folks of today perhaps better to speak of weariness or the presence of God for a people who have seemingly written him out of their lives?*

*If we want to try to get the light thing, should we start the service this week without any lights on? Should we pay some special attention to the lighting of candles in our sanctuary this week? I think we also might talk about the Easter vigil if we are hosting one in a few weeks.*

*Do you have a spot light you can use to throw light on the cross?*

*We need light to walk, to move, to survive, it makes the grass and the plants green and grow, darkness reduces us to begging. Without the light, we are immobilized in hopelessness.*

*The Israelites were led by a pillar of fire and cloud. We are drawn to a light in the dark. I think the issue here is that we don't really think we are in the dark. Remember by the end of the pericope today, the problem with the Pharisees is that they do not think they are blind/in the dark. That self-perception has them in darkness deeper than that of the blind man.*

*As we get older we often find that we need increasing levels of light to read. To access the good word means I have to turn on the lights.*

*Is there anything we can do today, every day, which would remind us of Christ? Do we post a thing in our showers which reminds us baptism when we step in there? Do we find something which we do every day and that it gives us an occasion to remember Jesus? Do we post the Ten Commandments on the mirror?*

*For the preacher this presents a genuine problem. To a generation of people who are not asking the theological questions which our proclamation is answering, what do we do? Folks are not*

*looking for the “Light of the world.” They don’t perceive the darkness. Has the electrification of our world simply rendered the metaphor obsolete? They don’t connect their interpersonal struggles, their broken families, and their loneliness with darkness. So when we proclaim “Light” they are shrugging like someone in a well lit room who has just been handed a flashlight.*

*We are speaking with an ancient metaphor which has effectively “died.” (If you want to know more about dead metaphors consider J. A. O. Preus III’s text “Just Words” published by CPH.)*

*The mature Christians swim in a general world view which perceives of the person as basically an agent of their own free will and that will is, in most cases, good. They don’t define sin as a fundamental brokenness of the human being but as a misstep, a mistake, an error, or a lack of understanding. The only time we see “sin” in a conversation outside of church today is on the dessert menu at a restaurant.*

*So how do we present the Jesus of this text, this Light of the World, to our world? If we have to explain how their problems are darkness and then immediately proclaim the Light, we will have a small but largely intellectual impact. I doubt we will really get to their hearts in a meaningful way with this sermon.*

*The thoughtful preacher will realize that the people are in darkness, whether they are calling it that or not. We will not want to explain their feelings and tell them that it is darkness. We will want to tap their feelings of dismay, disillusionment, discouragement, depression, desperation, and even despair. That is one sort of darkness. The Jesus we proclaim will need to be the answer to those things. The earliest Christian preachers met with wild success in terms of hearts and lives changed. They had a really strange, counter-intuitive message cloaked in a Jewish idiom which made it difficult to hear. Yet people believed. That was the work of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who imbues our preaching. Enter the pulpit with confidence in Him.*

*So our people come to church with what on their hearts?*

- 1. Loneliness. They sit in restaurants and whip out their smart phones and no one talks any more. For all our social media, we are more and more isolated.*
- 2. Discontented. We have so much. I remember speaking to a refugee from Ethiopia. His wife worked at a parking garage all night. He was looking for a job. He probably made less than \$1000/month. He told me he was so blessed. How have we come to expect so much and even when we have it to be so unhappy? Since the post-WWII boom we have seen such a rise in the standard of living, yet we are in some ways so much more miserable. The stuff has proved to be a poor source of happiness. This is a huge category.*
- 3. Fear. Financial security – many fear what will happen to them. I think many are also fearful a long lingering death in which they lose any semblance of independence.*

4. *Identity. We put so much of our identity in our ability to move about, our jobs, our doings, when God has in fact created us to be human beings, not human doings. God values us differently than we do. We see productivity, independence, exercising our own will as being the things that make us valuable. But God does not evaluate that way. He values us in Christ and sees all our life, the whole of it, from the helpless infant to the helpless old man in a nursing home through that Jesus lens. He values it all. We would call the gospel here vocation. We are not judged on the “what we do,” but on the fact that all of it is redeemed by Christ. That is true for all of us, no matter how productive we are.*
5. *Powerlessness. We fear this, we feel this. There are impersonal “forces” out there which we cannot control. Government, economy, environment, and much more seems to grow more and more potent while the man in the pew seems to grow less and less able to do anything about it.*

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserve only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*God’s mercies are new every morning. There is that light thing again. Lenten piety reminds us that we deserve punishment and God is merciful. The faith and the humility of the past weeks are not left behind as though we have somehow accomplished them and forgotten that. But now in that humility and looking for that mercy we ask that God would grant us to heartily acknowledge God’s goodness, give thanks for the benefits and then serve in a willing obedience. I think the progression and the adjectives are really important here.*

*First one has to see and acknowledge the blessing, then the first reaction is “Godward,” it gives thanks. Then the next reaction is formative, it shapes our lives, we serve. That is the progression of true Christian service. Notice it does not go through fear, guilt, shame, greed or other motivators we often see for human behavior. It is the faithful obedience which Paul mentions in Romans 1. This is the willing, cheerful heart which eagerly serves God, which runs to its task because our Father has asked us, and Jesus is beckoning and his smiling eyes assures us that he loves what we are doing.*

*The adjectives are also important. The acknowledgement is hearty. It is a thing of the heart and it runs to the very center of our being. This is not a superficial sort of thing, but an acknowledgment that permeates us, to our core. The thanksgiving is also modified, not by an adjective but by a prepositional phrase “for all your benefits.” The thanksgiving is universal. This is the one thing that non-Christians often notice about Christians, they know how to say*

*“Thank you.” The last is also important: A service in willing obedience. Think about the times you have willingly obeyed. You obeyed the cries of your infant as he or she demanded attention and food. You willingly obeyed your spouse (at least once in a while.) You willingly obey directions of a preacher at church as he motions you to stand and sit. There are also many times in which you unwillingly obey: the policeman whose presence makes you slow down, the referee at a game who reins in your competitive spirit with a penalty, the doctor who tells you to lose some weight, etc.*

*God is after the willing obedience, the sort of thing you want to do. He knows that the way to that sort of obedience is through his love acknowledged, thanked and responded to in service. He does not demand that sort of obedience, because the demand itself would destroy it. The deed done out of a demand is no longer really a willing obedience, it is obedience to the demand. God wants your loving and cheerful obedience, and he will not be satisfied with anything less. He got that worshipful obedience from a blind man whose eyes he opened in the Gospel reading today. He gets that from you too and the whole congregation to whom you preach. This is the obedience that flows from a faithful heart, forgiven by him, loved by him, saved by him. He has given even his own Son to get it.*

*Lutherans don't talk much about obedience. We might not even think of it as a virtue. It is rather sheep-like, docile, or the mark of an unoriginal thinker. Yet, obedience was at one point in our culture a very good thing. It is one of the 12 Boy Scout pledges. Is this a product of the 1960's and the rebellion against the 1950's focus on conformity? So many things changed there, including many words like love. Has obedience morphed into something else than it was for our parents' generations? Is it just the American independence and self-reliance coming out? Are we reacting to an over-emphasis on obedience which might be seen in certain evangelical circles? I did not write many sermons on obedience, or at least not under that term. Can we preach obedience as anything other than law? It would seem that Paul and the Confessions thought so.*

*Do you want to read more about this willing obedience? Consider the Augsburg Confession Article VI, and the Apology Article VI, but do not stop there, you will really also want to read the Formula of Concord, Articles III and IV. This is a very Lutheran thing.*

*Are we just too self-centered to willingly obey? David Brooks refers to this as the “Big Me.” We see it in social media – I post therefore I am. We see it in athletics and politics and entertainment with the outsized egos and the sense of entitlement that seems to reign in every sphere. Rudeness and demanding personalities seem to be the normal today. Is willing obedience simply a bridge too far for most of us in a sermon?*

*The problem is likely that obedience is an easy sell to the willingly obedient. The guy who is volunteering at the food bank because he loves doing it, doesn't need a sermon on willing obedience. The guy who is self-centered can only hear this as brutal law. Now not only does he have to obey, but he has to do it willingly. He has to like it. That is tough.*

## Readings

Isaiah 42:14-21

<sup>14</sup> For a long time I have held my peace;  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor;  
I will gasp and pant.

<sup>15</sup> I will lay waste mountains and hills,  
and dry up all their vegetation;  
I will turn the rivers into islands,  
and dry up the pools.

<sup>16</sup> And I will lead the blind  
in a way that they do not know,  
in paths that they have not known  
I will guide them.  
I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
the rough places into level ground.

These are the things I do,  
and I do not forsake them.

<sup>17</sup> They are turned back and utterly put to shame,  
who trust in carved idols,  
who say to metal images,  
“You are our gods.”

<sup>18</sup> Hear, you deaf,  
and look, you blind, that you may see!

<sup>19</sup> Who is blind but my servant,  
or deaf as my messenger whom I send?  
Who is blind as my dedicated one,  
or blind as the servant of the LORD?

<sup>20</sup> He sees many things, but does not observe them;  
his ears are open, but he does not hear.

<sup>21</sup> The LORD was pleased, for his righteousness' sake,  
to magnify his law and make it glorious.

<sup>22</sup> *But this is a people plundered and looted;  
they are all of them trapped in holes  
and hidden in prisons;*

*they have become plunder with none to rescue,  
spoil with none to say, “Restore!”*

<sup>23</sup> *Who among you will give ear to this,*

*will attend and listen for the time to come?*

<sup>24</sup> *Who gave up Jacob to the looter,  
and Israel to the plunderers?*

*Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned,  
in whose ways they would not walk,  
and whose law they would not obey?*

<sup>25</sup> *So he poured on him the heat of his anger  
and the might of battle;*

*it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;  
it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.*

*God has a passion for his people. He is like a woman giving birth, panting and writhing. But it is not a child that is produced but salvation itself. The desert will be transformed; the blind will be able to walk there.*

*But there is more to the blindness than just the physically blind. The people of God have been blind to his mercy from the very beginning. How else to explain the grumbling in the wilderness when they had manna every day to eat, water from a rock, the Red Sea crossed, etc. God is offering a way for the spiritually blind as well, the blind by faith. He will himself lead them, take them by the hand. The servant himself will enter into their blindness and the instrument of their salvation will be like them.*

*The idolatrous will be put to shame, but the servant doesn't fare so well either.*

*Isaiah called to a people whose faith had been shaken to its core. The exile had caused many to doubt the real value of worshiping the Lord. Others had compromised themselves before the conquerors might. Some had bought into the idea that there were many ways to worship God and so when in Babylon, do as the Babylonians. Isaiah will hear none of it in the first millennium BC or in the third millennium AD. We too have many who doubt the value of being a person of God, they have compromised themselves again and again before the gods of this age, and they have bought into the "many paths to truth" mantra which permeates the North American religious scene. Isaiah assures the reader that the idolatrous will be put to shame, but God will take his blind and stubborn people by the hand once more, transform the desert, work out the salvation which is so hard for the people of God.*

*What does one make of this servant? Is it Jesus? Is it the people of Israel? Who is this servant that he is so blind? Is it the prophet himself?*

*Psalm 142 A maskil of David, when he was in the cave*

*With my voice I cry out to the LORD;  
with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD.*

<sup>2</sup> *I pour out my complaint before him;  
I tell my trouble before him.*



<sup>3</sup> When my spirit faints within me,  
you know my way!  
In the path where I walk  
they have hidden a trap for me.

<sup>4</sup> Look to the right and see:  
there is none who takes notice of me;  
no refuge remains to me;  
no one cares for my soul.

<sup>5</sup> I cry to you, O LORD;  
I say, "You are my refuge,  
my portion in the land of the living."

<sup>6</sup> Attend to my cry,  
for I am brought very low!  
Deliver me from my persecutors,  
for they are too strong for me!

<sup>7</sup> Bring me out of prison,  
that I may give thanks to your name!  
The righteous will surround me,  
for you will deal bountifully with me.

*We really don't know how accurate the ascriptions are which are found before many Psalms in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. But even if it is not accurate, it surely reflects the fact that they people of old thought this belonged to David when he was in the cave. If you remember the story, Saul was chasing him and he lived with his band of sometimes unsavory people in a cave. Once he had the chance to kill Saul, but he did not. He counted on God to deliver him from the persecution of Saul, he would not take matters into his own hands (vs 6)*

*David was brought out that prison and set up on the throne of Israel.*

*Ephesians 5:8-14 This editorial choice on the part of the pericope editors is really strange. They have started us off in in the middle of a sentence. I have included the whole section which seems like a better approach here, certainly as we speak of this text.*

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

*<sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of*

*these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), <sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. <sup>13</sup> But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, <sup>14</sup> for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,*

*“Awake, O sleeper,  
and arise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”*

*<sup>15</sup> Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*Scholars are not quite sure what we should do with Ephesians. It is different than other letters of Paul, so different that some have suggested that this was not Paul's letter at all, but at best something that one of his disciples wrote. The sentences are too long, the theology is a little different than we read in other places, etc. Others, however, read the same evidence and come to very different conclusions. Luke T. Johnson, and I personally like his approach to this, suggests that Ephesians is really Paul's last will and testament letter. It is different because he is writing to all the churches shortly before he dies. He doesn't so much contradict what he says earlier as he applies his words now to every situation rather than the individual situations of his earlier letters. The writing is indeed better, more stylish, but that would be expected from that sort of a document. That would make this letter to the Ephesians very important for the Christian community. True, Paul wrote really important things to the Corinthians and getting to see how Paul dealt with those problems gives me key insights to the Gospel. But this is Paul talking much more directly to every Christian.*

*In terms of how these readings intersect with each other, these words from Ephesians serve as the application of the John text. Having our eyes opened by the Savior, walking in the light, means a transformed life for the baptized. The fruit of the light, the love, the kindness, the gentleness, the fruits of the Spirit, these are where the light of Christ directs our feet to walk. The deeds of darkness are exposed and its fruitless ways are avoided. The secret deeds of those who walk in darkness are loathsome, but Christ has given us another way.*

*For a person who believes themselves to be in the light, this will always sound like law. If you hand a candle to a man in a well lit room and tell him to carry it around, he will resent you for it. Give him that same candle and command in a very dark room and it is a totally different*

*thing. The light will give him the ability to move safely. It will be a blessing. For the man who is in the dark, this is pure Gospel. You cannot preach this as Gospel until you run through the John text really. Paul has put this at the end of his letter for a reason. He has done the blindness and sight piece earlier in the text, different metaphors, but same issue. Do you remember chapter 2:1-10? 'You were dead in your sins – God has made you alive in Christ...' The question for the preacher here is how to prepare his congregation to hear this as the Gospel that it is intended to be. Clearly the pericope authors want this to run through the Gospel account of the blind man whom Jesus healed in John 9.*

*The aforementioned citations from the Confessions would also be good here.*

John 9:1-41 or John 9:1-7, 13-17, 34-39

<sup>1</sup> As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. <sup>4</sup> We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." <sup>6</sup> Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud <sup>7</sup> and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

<sup>8</sup> The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" <sup>9</sup> Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." <sup>10</sup> So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" <sup>11</sup> He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight." <sup>12</sup> They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

<sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup> Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup> So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." <sup>16</sup> Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. <sup>17</sup> So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

<sup>18</sup> The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight <sup>19</sup> and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" <sup>20</sup> His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. <sup>21</sup> But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." <sup>22</sup> (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should

confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.)<sup>23</sup> Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

<sup>24</sup> So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.”<sup>25</sup> He answered, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”<sup>26</sup> They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”<sup>27</sup> He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”<sup>28</sup> And they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.”<sup>29</sup> We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”<sup>30</sup> The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”<sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.<sup>32</sup> Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.<sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”<sup>34</sup> They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”<sup>36</sup> He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”<sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.”<sup>38</sup> He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”<sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?”<sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.

*John’s prologue to his Gospel account really highlights just how important this text is for the whole Gospel of John project. Notice all the highlighted sections in the reprint of that prologue below. The prologue is really a summary in miniature of the whole book and one can see here just how important the whole metaphor of light and seeing is for John. This chapter 9 of his work, which sits almost in the middle of the book is therefore one of the pivotal points of the whole Gospel. Get this text right and you have understood a great deal of what John has in mind for the whole Gospel:*

John 1:1-18 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup> **In him was life, and the life was the light of men.** <sup>5</sup> **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was **John**. <sup>7</sup> **He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light**, that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

<sup>9</sup> **The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.** <sup>10</sup> **He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.** <sup>11</sup> He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, **and we have seen his glory**, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup> (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.' ") <sup>16</sup> And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> **No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.**

*John 9 is really the text for this day. One can hardly not preach this.*

*John puts his strongest message into a particular genre of literature. He has set this up like an ancient drama, the sort of thing that his people would have been very familiar with. This is a little like preaching with sit-com illustrations or with characters from the Sunday Comics. It is actually a good way to contemporize your message if you do it well. We have a hard time seeing this as funny. We are pious and perhaps that gets in our way. We also are reading this in another language which sometimes really affects humor. But we are so used to reading these stories devotionally and simply blow past the reality that John wrote this for an audience. We dive into the text to encounter Jesus and we forget that this was literature as well.*

*In Hellenistic plays of the first century, only two or three characters were ever on stage at any given time. There might be a multi-member chorus, but they only spoke with one voice, so they are effectively one character. Various genres of drama followed strict rules. The regular theater patron would quickly recognize the sort of play he or she was attending.*

*The whole chapter works out this way, as a series of scenes:*

*Scene 1: Jesus and his disciples (chorus) encounter a blind man*

*Why is he blind? Whose fault is it? His parents or his own? Jesus will hear none of this, but launches into the thematic statement of the whole chapter. He is the Light of the World. While the light shines, it is good to work, for soon darkness comes.*

*Jesus spits, smears mud on the blind man's eyes, and sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam (Shalom-Peace/health) before exiting with his disciples. The blind man follows Jesus instructions and returns to the stage seeing which then ushers in the next scene. Jesus and the disciples exit the stage.*

*Scene 2: The blind man and the neighbors (another chorus)*

*Is he really the blind man? Yes! No! But the blind man is adamant, "I am the same guy?" (This really is funny) The people finally pose this question to him – how did you come to*

*see? He replies, “The man, Jesus, made mud...and now I see!” Notice how you the reader know much more than the people in the play. This is one of the key elements of comedy, even today on the sitcoms we watch. It is a form of irony.*

### *Scene 3: The blind man and the Pharisees*

*Part I How can this be – healing on the Sabbath – it must be a fraud.*

*The Pharisees just cannot see.*

*The blind man’s sight is getting clearer: “He is a prophet!”*

*Part II The blind man, his parents and the Pharisees*

*It really is the blind man – there is no fraud – but how can he see?*

*You ask him, he is of age – the parents are blinded by fear.*

*Part III The blind man and the Pharisees again*

*Why do you ask – do you want to be his disciples? (This is funny)*

*We are disciples of Moses but we don’t know where this man is from!*

*The blind man teaches the Pharisees a little about theology and logic*

*“He is from God” – the logic is sound, but notice how the blind man sees even more clearly. Now Jesus is more than just a prophet.*

### *Scene 4: Jesus and the blind man*

*“I Am He”*

*The blind man worships. (Jews reserved this act only for God!) He is seeing clearly!*

*The Pharisees are blind and if they would but admit it, they too could see.*

*The style of this is really a form of comedy, a comedy much like Aristophanes “The Women” where the women of the world take over and banish all war. It is funny, but not funny. If you were a watcher of MASH on television, you know that comedy can sometimes have a sharp point.*

*The style is a comedy, which is to say that the form is comedic. Within the little drama we see that the blind man can see and the people around him, especially the Pharisees are getting progressively more and more blind. But this is not funny, it is tragic as well. Their blindness results in his being expelled from the synagogue, in a tragic echo of the fact that they are themselves the truly blind, because they will not admit their own sin. This much more serious blindness keeps them from the kingdom itself, excluding them just as they excluded the once blind man.*

*The blind man's vision, however, grows ever more acute. First he calls Jesus a man, then a prophet, then from God, then in the final scene, he worships Jesus, something no Godly Jew would ever do unless he believed himself to be in the presence of God. The humor element revolves around the fact that by the end of the story, only the blind man can see, everyone else, other than Jesus, seems to be suffering from a sort of blindness. Even the disciples are blind at the beginning of the text.*

*Of course there is another actor in this play, the reader him/herself. You also know what is going on and you are also given to see. John wants you to "see" (understand) that the worship which you render to God through Jesus is the same worship which the blind man offered. John's community was also being cast out, excluded, and persecuted for its worship of Jesus. John very much wants to affirm them as being the only folks who can see the truth. There is something humorous about being persecuted by the blind folks of the day, persecuted because you can see.*

*So what is all this about? The blind can see, the presumably sighted, those who are immersed in the Torah, the Pharisees, are as blind as bats. What sort of vision is Jesus giving here? What does it mean that he is the Light of the World? These are the questions this text raises for the Christian preacher. In which category would our Lord find us today? Where do we fit into this picture? Are we the disciples who are blind to any possibility other than sin is punitive? Are we the neighbors who cannot see the miracles in our own faces? Are we the Pharisees who hold onto their traditions and their past so tightly that their eyelids are screwed shut? Are we willing to admit our own blindness that Christ's light may show us who we are, what we are, what he has done, where we are headed and what to do?*

*Do lifelong Christians have a tough time with this? We have been sitting in church our whole lives. We have a hard time imagining that we have ever needed to have our eyes opened. We believe that we can see. But doesn't that make us the Pharisees?*

*What are the "mud in our eyes" moments which Christ has acted within our lives? We often respond so politely and diligently to the altar call of the Eucharist, and as a result we don't see that this is just as dramatic of a moment as the reprobate who comes to faith. One of my colleagues who had grown up in the Four Square church said his first time in a Lutheran service blew his mind away. Everyone stood up and did their testimony in unison (the creed). He said that was the coolest moment.*

*Christ is faster than the speed of dark – Jesus is the light of the world – he beats back the dark.*

*Clearly the blindness and the seeing of the man was much more than simply a physical blindness. He opened his eyes spiritually, emotionally, intellectually. When the Lord gives light, he gives holistic light – it involves the whole human being. The man who received his sight in the Gospel lesson had his whole life transformed by this act. He can get a job. Jesus cared about that too.*

**Law**

1. We are blinded by sin – there is a banality to sin, we just don't see the harm it causes us or the people around us. The world would really be a much happier place if we all just tried to keep the Ten Commandments. We could put the lock manufacturers out of business, politics would be totally different, what more laws would we need?
2. The darkness of sin that renders us blind has so many different layers and levels. The disciples who are walking in the light of Christ every day, they are blind and betray as much with their question. Fear renders the parents blind. Tradition and stubborn adherence to something other than the Word of God blinds the Pharisees.
3. The darkness has serious implications for our relationship with God. For the fruit of darkness cuts us off from him. We cannot see the way in the darkness of Sin. Even if we want to go the right way, we cannot. It must be illumined for us. Our need is great. The darkness equals death.
4. We often are so blind, so accustomed to the darkness that we don't even realize that we are blind. We think this is normal. It is not normal. We should not be struggling with the things we struggle with, the decisions which perplex us, the forks in the road before which we dither. We should not be cleaning up the messes we have to clean up because we make poor choices or don't see the potency of God to be the solution to our problems. How often don't we make a tense situation worse because we assume the worst of someone? How often don't we let our fear or pride keep us from reconciling or taking the first step and making an apology?

## **Gospel**

1. Christ is the Light of the World – he shines in the darkness of this world and shows us the Godly way which starts with the grace of God to sinners. Our minds would never have thought of this, but that makes it no less true. God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts, and they are higher as the heavens are higher than the earth. Gracious and merciful love to sinful people is the light of Christ.
2. Christ's light also shines upon our darkness, even those things which we would rather forget. But Jesus knows that they are a poison which kills. He will not leave any dark corners in our life for the cockroaches of sin to lurk. Though this process is sometimes unpleasant in the same way that a dental cleaning is unpleasant, it is also something we know is for our good. His light purifies us.
3. This Light of Christ also illumines our life. The ancients lit their lamps every night with a flame they first lit at the Easter Vigil. Just so, the light of Christ's love illumines our actions. The sin of a neighbor is now not a matter for us to seek vengeance, but to forgive. The hurt of a neighbor does not see us laughing into our sleeves, but empathizing and helping as we are given to help. Christ shines a light upon our way with Him. We know what is important because he has told us.



4. The Light of Christ shines on our path. Jesus has ascended to heavenly glory. By uniting with him in his death (Rom 6) we also are united with him in his resurrection and life. Like a lighted exit sign above a door in a dark building, he shows us the way out and the way up, that way is Him!

Sermon Themes *The last times when we did this, it was a particularly fertile discussion for us. We developed no less than four different themes or approaches to this text. I have expanded on each of them, but you will want to come to the Tuesday discussion with an idea of what you think your folks need:*

1. The Testimony of the Blind Man (That the hearer would stubbornly hold to the testimony of Christ – repeating it even when pressure is applied to be quiet.)
  1. The blind man knew what he was saying, it was the event that had happened to him – our testimony is the story of what he has done to and for us. Often our testimony is weakened because we are trying to tell a story of someone else or the biblical story. Our story is the one we know best and can stand upon with the greatest confidence.
  2. He stuck to it, he would not let go, even when pressure was applied. You have to be pretty sure of what you are saying to have that sort of sticking power. What are the moments when God applied mud to our eyes? “Here’s mud in your eye!” is this story the basis of that toast?
  3. His stubbornness gives him opportunity to tell his story over and over.
  4. He is being constantly watched by Jesus, who notices that he is cast out, and seeks him out. Christ is watching over your testimony as well. Nothing will happen to you that he cannot handle.

This is an evangelism sermon; although, I have found that this is not the best word to use for folks. It is church speak and it frankly frightens them. The preacher of this sermon will want to get his folks thinking about what it is that they have experienced with Christ, fit that into the biblical stream, and send them out with a story to tell.

The catechumen is being enlisted in an army of witnesses. This will mean persecution. There are folks who don’t want to hear this, there are forces who don’t want you to say this. But the worshiper of Christ can see, even when everyone around them doubts it and hates them for it. They can see the truth. They must speak it.

Our young people have heroes who stand up and speak the truth in the face of persecution. They well may see Julian Assange in that light or the folks who protest the oil pipeline at Standing Rock in South Dakota. The protestors who faced down

2. Jesus is the Light of the World (That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to confess the light of Christ, his life-giving, life-defining, guiding light has shone in our hearts and minds.)
  1. Without light we are immobilized – we cannot move without hurting ourselves or getting lost.
  2. The Light of the World has come, Jesus has shone in our lives.
  3. That means we can get up and go, we can tell, we can serve, we can live, not just spiritually, but holistically. The life of Christ, the servant life of Christ, is the light of men. He who has picked us up and saved us has also given his servant life to us.

This sermon picks up the Epistle lesson and its themes of a life which is lived in the light of Christ. The evil is avoided, the good is embraced. All is much clearer now. It is not to say that this is suddenly easy. The tempter continues to deceive and defraud, but Christ is there through his Holy Spirit to help us.

The preacher will want his folks to put themselves at the end of this story, as the man worships Jesus. What will his next day look like, and the following? He has been given sight, he can get a job, he can see his friends' faces, he can love and care and serve in ways he never could before.

There is a second miracle here to speak of as well. We know that if we take a person who was born blind and find a way to give them their sight, we have to do this before they reach puberty. If we don't they will not be able to handle this. They will commit suicide because of the sensory overload of vision. Their brain has not grown up with all that stimuli. Jesus also had to do a brain rewire or this was no favor to the blind man.

Jesus has also done something of a brain rewire for us. The old patterns which obtained since the fall into sin have also been reworked in Christ. Our "way" has been changed. This is what Paul is talking about in the Epistle lesson.

Our whole life now becomes a witness – our business life, our time in the market, our families, our time on the soccer field, or the day we spend resting with our family. Jesus has empowered all these things. We were blind, but now we can see all these things differently. When we speak to the neighbor, to the friend, to the associate, we are an occasion through these things for the light of Christ to shine through us to others. Is this a place to talk about the doctrine of vocation a little?

3. Jesus heals our Blindness (That the Spirit of God would open the eyes of the hearer to see/encounter God through the gift of His Son in Word and Sacrament and community today.)

If you have preached the Gospels the past weeks in which Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and the woman at the well came at noon, when the sun was the brightest, you might want to tie this together. This man was always in the dark, and Jesus brought him into the noon-day sun, the brightness that only comes from Jesus. Everyone else in the story was in the dark. Nicodemus was afraid, the woman was a sinner, and both of them were met by Christ.

This sermon will want to proclaim that the same Jesus is present in your assembly today who opened the eyes of this blind man. He is present today to heal us, open our eyes blinded by all sorts of things. Ephesians might help us if we expand the text a little. If you read the passage immediately before the reading you might conclude that popular media and advertising blind us. Feeding on discontent and covetousness, our culture fills our heads with images and conversations which numb us/blind us to God's good life which he wants for us and which he gives us in Christ. We are never content with what we earn, but God has given us heaven in Christ.

1. They just could not see (I have found this to be really effective if you repeat it over throughout the message – retell the story and at each juncture, the disciples, the blind man, the neighbors, the parents, the Pharisees, etc, “just could not see.”) The disciples could only see his blindness as punishment, the neighbors could not see who he was, his parents were blinded by fear, and the Pharisees eyes were screwed tightly shut. Can we really see? Are our eyes screwed just as tightly shut? Remember the disciples are blind and the religious leaders are blind. Attending church is not a guarantee of clear vision!
2. The blind man, touched and healed by Jesus, could see more and more clearly – first Jesus was the man who healed him, then a prophet, then from God, finally, the God whom he worships.
3. Our eyes have been opened as well. Opened to see the world through the eyes of Jesus.
4. Today we encounter this same Jesus in the word we hear, the sacrament we eat and drink, the community of people into which he has called us. Notice the physicality of Jesus' action then – he smeared spit and mud on the man's eyes. That Jesus is physically just as much here. We eat him, we touch him, we hear him, and we experience him right here. This Jesus once spoke to creation and light sprang forth. This man is more than any other man – he is God and his word to us carries that same creative force it had in creation. And bless him that he does for blindness often leads

to particular maladies in the lives of congregations. Do we really see what Jesus has made my neighbor? Or do I still see him in the old way (II Corinthians 4-5)

This sermon is perhaps closest to what John initially intended with this text; although, that is a dangerous thing to say. John was a profound writer and the Holy Spirit may well have been intending things which John did not even know. But it seems that John's persecuted community was given to say that it was like this blind man. Their eyes were opened, they could see, but the folks around them could not.

The congregation whose numbers dwindle, whose children are gone, whose message has been muted more by the apathy of a community around it, might feel like it alone can see something and their neighbors, friends, even family cannot see it with them.

John in a sense wants them to say that, but for the blind man the critical difference was that he was out in that community stirring up the pot with his new-found sight. He was not huddled in some safe enclave of his home or church hoping friendly folks would come through the door. He was engaged with the very folks who were around him and some of them were hostile.

Jesus has opened our eyes – are you ready for that? [Let's worship him with the blind man.](#)

4. This is our baptism (That the Spirit would strengthen and embolden the hearer by reminding him/her of baptism where God did great things and made great promises to us.)
  1. The blind man is sent to the waters, washes, and comes back seeing. We too have come from waters profoundly changed.
  2. The change is dramatic, the neighbors don't even recognize him. – We too have been transformed by our baptismal waters. Just look at the Epistle lesson.
  3. The man must exclaim – it is me! But more importantly he has to exclaim who Jesus is. Our baptism demands that we give credit where credit is due for the profound changes that have come over us – I am who I am because Jesus knows me.
  4. The man meets with resistance – the baptized always do.
  5. But Jesus watches over the man, even when he doesn't recognize him. Jesus is always there watching over the baptized, their testimony has no guarantee of acceptance by men, but it is always received as worship by God.

This sermon might be the easiest to preach. It is simply a retelling of the story with a comparison to baptism woven into it.

